Political opposition in civil society. An analysis of the interactions of secular and religious associations in Algeria and Jordan.

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Abstract

The lack of effective of political parties is one of the dominant characteristics of modern Arab polities. The role of opposition to the authoritarian regimes is therefore left to a number of civil society organisations. This study examines the interactions among such groups in the context of the traditional transition paradigm and analyses specifically how religious and secular organisations operate and interact. The empirical evidence shows that such groups, far from attempting any serious coalition building to make common democratising demands on the regime, have a competitive relationship due to their ideological differences and conflicting policy preferences. This strengthens authoritarian rule even in the absence of popular legitimacy. The study focuses its attention on Algeria and Jordan.

Introduction

One of the principal characteristics of the authoritarian political regimes in the Middle East and North Africa is the weakness of established political parties. Even in liberalised autocracies[1] such as Jordan or Morocco, countries with apparently functioning multiparty systems, official political parties, structured similarly to their Western counterparts, are largely perceived to be ineffective in challenging the authoritarian structure of the state.[2] Some scholars go even further and underline how official opposition movements lack so strongly in autonomy as to form a pillar of the authoritarian regime itself.[3] Thus, in the Middle East and North Africa, it is within the realm of a growing politicised 'civil society' that demands for radical change to the political, economic and social structures in place in the region are articulated. Given the complex relationship between civil society and democratisation, it is important to look at the dynamics that are generated within civil society by the interactions among different opposition associations and groups.

The traditional transition paradigm often underlines the important role of an active civil society in bringing about democratisation, which is at times believed to be a condition *sine qua non* for the establishment of democratic governance. More recently however such a strong link between democratisation and civil society activism has come under increasing criticism. In addition, the very theoretical usefulness and practical applicability of such a concept to non-Western areas is questioned and this is particularly the case in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In spite of this criticism, this paper contends that the civil society is a useful category to examine neglected social dynamics that allow us to better grasp some of the reasons why democratisation seems not to be occurring. This study, through an in-depth examination of two countries, will analyse one very specific aspect of 'civil society': the interactions between liberal/secular and religious organisations involved in the promotion of human rights and democratisation. The nature of such interactions will shed some light on how opposition politics within civil society is structured and the impact it has on the political system.

Civil society, democratisation and the MENA region

Civil society, understood as 'the zone of voluntary associative life beyond family and clan affiliations but separate from the state and the market'[4], has always

played a prominent role in explaining processes of democratisation. In fact, 'building a robust civil society is […] postulated as a precondition for democratization and democratic consolidation.'[5] Empirical evidence from Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America seemed to confirm such a view. More recently however, the close relationship between civil society and democratisation has become heavily contested both theoretically and empirically. From a theoretical point of view, Carothers[6], Encarnacion[7] and Berman[8] question the *a priori* positive normative connotations that the concept has taken on and argue for a more neutral definition, that would take into account the fact that many groups belonging to civil society are rather 'uncivil' and are certainly not pro-democracy and pro-human rights. From an empirical point of view, Tempest argues that the usefulness of civil society to generate political change is overemphasised, even in the seemingly clear-cut cases of Central Europe.[9]

This wider debate on civil society has had a significant impact on scholars of the Middle East and North Africa where authoritarian rule is still the norm. With respect to the variable civil society, the absence of democratisation has been then explained in different ways. Those who adopt a positive normative approach to the concept argued for some time that civil society was too weak to have an impact on political change.[10] When empirical evidence was offered that Arab societies were far from being weak and passive[11], some scholars, adopting a less loaded normative view of the concept, argued that many of the groups belonging to it were authoritarian by nature and therefore unable to promote democratic change.[12] This applies specifically to the dominant role that Islamist movements and associations play in contemporary Arab social life. Other scholars still underline how the growth of civil society does not lead to democratisation because it has no real autonomy from the regimes in place and is therefore unable to perform its primary function.[13]

While a more neutral definition of civil society is welcome, this should not obscure the fact that the activism of civil society organisations in authoritarian contexts relies heavily on a discourse that fundamentally opposes the practices of the regimes in power and can therefore be seen as an agent of democratic change, particularly when the language of democracy and rights, however loosely defined, is utilised by the vast majority of the civil society actors involved. In this respect, Gellner's definition of civil society can apply to the region: 'a cluster of institutions and associations strong enough to prevent tyranny, but which are, nevertheless, entered freely rather than imposed either by birth or by awesome ritual'.[14] As

mentioned above, civil society in the region is very active and, as empirical evidence shows[15], it is not simply a mechanism of social control, but enjoys a considerable degree of autonomy from the regimes. In addition, the presence of Islamism within civil society should not a priori determine its inherent authoritarian nature because, as shown elsewhere, associations and movements cannot simply be labelled authoritarian without examining the context within which they operate, which inevitably constrains their actions and modifies beliefs.[16]

John Entelis argues convincingly that 'without a well developed civil society, it is difficult, if not impossible, to have an atmosphere supportive of democracy.'[17] In addition, empirical evidence seems to demonstrate that a weakening of civil society's vibrancy leads to a weakening of trust and interest for democratic engagement even in established democracies such as the United States.[18] The role of civil society deserves therfeore to be analysed in more detail in the Arab world because of the apparent paradox that exists between its inherent strength and its inability to affect regime change. Given that established political parties are largely ineffective and delegitimised in the eyes of citizens, civil society organisations are increasingly engaged in political matters particularly in demands for more protection of individual rights and for the introduction of some form of government accountability. Islamist movements are at the forefront of this struggle and they, even when taking on the role of more traditional parties, such as the Jordanian Islamic Action Front, are much better analysed as civil society actors because of their numerous social activities, their provision of services, their autonomy from the ruling elites and their structured ties with a number of Islamic charities and groups fully operating in society. In fact Islamic activism is better understood as social activism.[19]

It is within this active civil society that opposition politics should be examined when it comes to the Arab world.

Opposition dynamics and the transition paradigm

With this in mind, it is time to turn to the empirical examination of the dynamics of civil society and their potential role in democratisation in the region. This can be done through the theoretical framework provided by the transition paradigm. Its core assumptions have marked the academic world over the last three decades and were very much helpful in modelling the institutional changes taking place throughout

the world, as a significant number of countries moved away from authoritarian rule.[20] The idea of dividing the process of transition into different stages that unfold consequentially one from the other has been particularly useful, as it permitted to identify key moments in the transition that would determine its success or failure. Even more importantly, it permitted to identify the principal actors playing the game outlining their most preferred outcomes, their interests and their perceptions about the game itself and the other players. From this theoretical work, practical advice could be given to those embarking on a transition in order to arrive at a positive outcome.[21]

There are three stages identified in the paradigm. The first one is the opening, when the regime, due usually to a crisis that sparks divisions within the ruling elites, begins to liberalise and move in the direction of democracy in order to re-gain some legitimacy. The opening itself does not have to be 'genuine' in the sense that only few transitions began with the true intention from the part of the regime to relinquish power and dismantle the existing political order. However, the opening up of the system provokes a number of unintended consequences, particularly because the regime usually overestimates its support in society. Such an opening is followed eventually by the second stage of the transition: the breakthrough. At this stage the old regime actually collapses and a new government emerges, which is in charge of designing the new rules of the game. Once the breakthrough is no longer hailed as such but becomes the everyday reality with which political actors have to contend with, the third stage begins. The transition in fact concludes through the consolidation of new institutions and with the progressive substantiation of democracy.[22] Obviously, the stages can last for a very length different time according to the specific country that is in transition and can offer alternatives, but 'the options are all cast in terms of the speed and direction with which countries move on the path, and not in terms of movement that does not conform with the path at all.'[23] This does not necessarily imply that there will not be transitions that will fail and that countries would not return to authoritarianism, but the model itself is rather teleological and seems to indicate that it does not really matter how long a country will be stuck at any given stage, it will eventually revert back to move along the path outlined above.

A number of analyses on the Middle East and North African subscribe quite fully to this teleology of democratisation and often emphasise different stages within this process as countries go through certain political and institutional changes.[24]

Looking at regime change through the framework of the transition paradigm and its model based on stages also permits scholars to identify actors and examine their interactions, whose actions are confined within the assumptions of the model as well. Thus, the opening always provokes a rift between hard-liners and soft-liners in the regime, with the former fundamentally opposed to any change and the latter believing that only change will allow for the survival of the ruling elite through its participation to the new political institutions. At the same time, the opening makes it possible for the opposition to come out in the pen and begin to organise in order to negotiate with the regime, which still retains the predominant position in the game.

Just as the ruling elites are divided, so is the opposition: there are therefore the moderates and the radicals. In the earlier 'exchanges' of the game between ruling elites and opposition, the interactions between opposition actors are of particular importance because their strength, their choices and their response to the opening will very likely determine how the ruling elite will react and condition whether they will continue with the opening or try to revert back to past practices.

This transition paradigm has recently come under severe and well-deserved criticism with scholars such as Carothers arguing quite convincingly that it should be abandoned because its assumptions are no longer valid in interpreting the current reality. The main problem is that 'no small amount of teleology is implicit in the transition paradigm.'[25] Thus, when we move from the model to the reality what emerges is clearly a different picture and aside from possibly a dozen country that have made a truly complete transition and now enjoy a consolidated democracy, 'by far the majority of the third wave countries have not achieved relatively well functioning democracy or do not seem to be deepening or advancing whatever democratic progress they have made.'[26] Carothers and others are concerned with the picture regarding the transition paradigm and are critical of its teleology and its inability to conceive that transitions are so different as not to be easily submitted to a model that would, more or less, fit them all. In this respect, they are certainly correct and evidence suggests that their criticism is well founded.

Nevertheless, the paradigm might still have some interesting and useful insights to offer, particularly when it comes to interpret transitions as 'games' played by actors and outcome determined by actors' choices. The path, and therefore a foregone conclusion to regime change, might not exist, but it is very difficult to take actors and their interactions out of the picture completely because it is not only

structural factors that are at play; agency matters.[27] One important contribution that emerges from the literature on transitions is that at one point in time, for the opening to be temporarily successful, is that the opposition has to be somewhat united and make common demands on the regime. Under any authoritarian regime, many different opposition currents exist, whose political actions and stances are derived from a range of different ideologies and belief systems. The game is indeed played by more than one opposition actor and unity of the opposition only occurs at a time when all the different groups, or at least the vast majority of them representing a large sector of society, pool their resources together to pressurise the regime into making the necessary concessions that will make it possible for them to legitimately compete for power. Once the open competition is guaranteed, the different opposition groups will go their separate ways and compete against each other.

It seems reasonable to hypothesise that all sincere opposition groups in an authoritarian regime suffer from the same constraints on their activities. Their publications are suppressed, members are jailed without trial or harassed, activities (marches, meetings) are either banned or disrupted and, more significantly, political demands for change ignored. It is also legitimate to hypothesise that actors finding themselves in such a situation would attempt to pool their resources in order to achieve what might be the only common goal: the removal of the current regime. In this respect, the ideology they subscribe to, the policy preferences they have and the vision of society they hold should theoretically be put on the backburner in order to achieve the goal of legitimately expressing such preferences. Coalition building, no matter how loose the coalition might be, would seem to the top priority. The evidence from a number of case studies points to the validity of such a strategic choice by opposition actors. Writing on the Czechoslovakian transition, Olson points out that all the opposition groups and formations 'were submerged […] in the formation of the Civic Forum of Prague, and the Public Against Violence in Bratislava. Both were amorphous reform groupings, united for the single purpose of removing communists from power. Having quickly achieved their goal, they as quickly lost the source of their cohesion."[28] The same trend towards unity is evident in Poland where the so called opposition 'lay left' were joined by Catholic activists within the group established prior to the arrival of *Solidarnosc* on the scene. *Solidarnosc* itself was a collection of different groups with different agendas, but with the common intent of removing the communists from power.[29] The subsequent divisions within the

movement testify to the heterogeneity of the trade union and its leaders. Latin America is not different and the Chilean opposition was also able to achieve a degree of unity to remove Pinochet and it brought together a number of different social movements and political actors with very little in common.[30]

Following from this, it should be expected that such tendency towards unity despite ideological and policy preferences differences would hold true in all contexts where the authoritarian regime lacks legitimacy, where openings of some sort exist and where opposition actors formally subscribe to a political platform and course of action aimed at regime change. Such conditions are certainly present in the contemporary Arab world as their political development over the last two decades demonstrates. Regimes in the region are largely perceived to be illegitimate by their own population, they have had to undergo a degree of liberalisation due to both domestic and international pressures and all opposition actors formally utilise the language of democracy, accountability and human rights to make demands for change. It is therefore expected that the empirical evidence would show that such coalition building is occurring and that formal co-operation does indeed take place between the different opposition groups within civil society.

The findings: Algeria and Jordan

When it comes to analysing how civil society groups preoccupied with issues of human rights and democratisation operate in the MENA region there are, broadly speaking, two patterns that can be identified in the interactions between religious and secular groups. The first pattern of interaction is one that can be labelled 'co-operative.' On a number of local and limited issues or on a case-by-case basis or on a set time scale, there is a certain degree of convergence and informal co-operation between secular and religious NGOs. If the issue at stake can be considered to a certain extent self-contained and one with which the regime itself feels reasonably comfortable dealing with, both religious and secular NGOs are capable of finding a common, if often informal, strategy of action. This has been the case of the informal common front against torture that characterised the relationship of liberal Moroccan associations for human rights and semi-legal Islamist groups such as the Justice and Charity Group.[31] The unity of intent between Islamists and secular liberal groups does not however tend to spill over to other more significant and potentially more disruptive issues for the regime. This pattern of co-operation usually leads the regime

to ‘give in’ on the matter, recognising the validity of the stance taken by civil society. The regime therefore seems to be confident that linkages and spill over will not occur. This is in stark contrast to the experience of both Eastern Europe and Latin America where small victories were used to extract even further concessions resulting ultimately in sweeping political changes. The second pattern of interaction that we find is ‘competitive’, whereby groups actually compete with each other for influence at the societal level, presenting a radically opposing vision of what ‘change’ should look like. On major issues such as the regulation of social relationships and political reforms that would truly affect the current domestic balance of power, secular and religious groups find themselves on opposing sides. The inability to form coalitions and common platforms of demands allows the regime to survive even in the absence of legitimacy, as it is able to *divide and conquer* the realm of civil society to its benefit. Again, such finding contradicts what the transition paradigm would hold.

Some practical examples might be useful in highlighting how the two patterns co-exist and operate. In Algeria, a self-contained issue unites both sectors of society: the fate of the disappeared during the civil war that Algerians endured for over a decade. A significant number of people from both sides (or from no side at all) disappeared during the fighting leaving thousand of families without any news regarding to the whereabouts of their loved ones. With the civil war practically over and the launch of ‘national reconciliation’ by president Bouteflika, these families have been able to air their grievances more openly and have been organising themselves in different groups to pressurise the government to release the details of what happened to the disappeared. The families would ideally like an investigation into the matter, but they might be satisfied with simple information. This is a matter that has united families whose disappeared members were indeed Islamist activists (not necessarily fighters) and families whose disappeared members are thought to have been taken by the security forces because of mistaken identity, because of non-political reasons or because they belonged to a non-Islamist anti-regime opposition group. In addition, some families also are engaged in finding out what happened to their loved ones taken by Islamist insurgents. *Djazairouna* is an association set up to find out the truth about the disappearance of people at the hands of Islamist groups and is led by Ms. Cherifa Kheddar, a secular woman with a long history of defending the victims of Islamist terrorism. Ms. Nacera Dutour, whose son disappeared a number of years ago when he was taken by the security forces, represents an organisation (SOS – Disparus) that is

'vaguely' Islamist and whose objective is to find out the truth about those who disappeared at the hands of the state.[32] The two groups represent two distinct sectors of society, but were able to form a coalition in the attempt to influence the vote on the Reconciliation Charter to which were both opposed. While ultimately rather unsuccessful (the Charter was approved by referendum), their common limited goal led them to adopt a common stance and bridge some of their differences. This resulted in the government taking their objections seriously and having to tolerate weekly demonstrations outside Parliament buildings.

This issue is a very sensitive one for the Algerian government, as members of the security forces still control the levers of power, but the pressure coming from the united front presented by religious and secular groups has to be dealt with. For this reason, the regime made some changes to the national reconciliation programme that, in theory, would disclose the fate of the disappeared in exchange for immunity for all the perpetrators. The morality of the law is certainly questionable and so it is its imposition, but it still provides a possible closure for the families and it is a project that enjoys popular support given that it is beneficial to both the security services and the Islamist insurgents. Even more interesting is the position taken by former FIS leader Ali Benhadj who argued quite strongly, in the only interview of the last 13 years, against the law of national reconciliation. He asserted 'how dare they speak of national reconciliation when we have been living under emergency law for the last 14 years?'.[33] This line of thinking finds the agreement of many in the civil society sectors who are liberal secular and would not have much in common with Benhadj. The Algerian League for human rights (LADDH) was for instance scathing in its rejection of the national reconciliation plan in so far as it gives amnesty to people who are responsible for crimes against humanity, which is in fact a crime that cannot be proscribed.

While a certain rapprochement has taken place on very specific issues, secular and Islamist associations are still very much divided when it comes to push for more significant and sweeping democratic changes because, despite utilising the language of democracy and human rights, they fundamentally disagree on what the future Algeria should look like. Thus, there is an unwillingness and an inability to form umbrella organizations that would be much stronger, and vocal in pushing for radical change. Thus, the Algerian regime can play the opposition actors within civil society against each other.

The interesting findings about Algeria are quite at odds with the expected outcomes not only when it comes to the recent period, but also when one looks at past events dating back to the attempted democratization of the late 1980s and early 1990s.[34] The end of the democratising process for instance took place with the support and, some argue, at the demand of a number of secular groups that did not want the Islamic Front in power. The very idea that political and human rights associations committed to democracy and very much involved in demanding political change would prefer the re-instauration of an authoritarian regime rather than seeing another opposition movement come to power was certainly not conceived of by those working on the transition paradigm.

In the Kingdom of Jordan, like in most other Arab countries, one of the major problems that NGOs from both sides of the spectrum attempt to highlight and fight is the corruption of public officials. A lawyer and a human rights activist working at the Arab Centre for Human Rights in Jordan (group with a secular ethos) labels the kingdom as 'the kingdom of corruption and confusion led by a king who is claiming to fight corruption through rewarding the corrupt.'[35] Another prominent secular figure in Jordan stated that 'Islamists of all kind, from right to left, agree exactly as nationalist leftists and rightists on fighting corruption and injustice.'[36] The end of corruption is also a major demand of the Islamist groups, including the Islamic Action Front. According to Zaki Bani Ershaid, leader of the IAF, 'fighting corruption, which is phenomenally endemic in Jordanian politics, especially within influential circles in the government, should be a priority to deal with, as agreed by all opposition groups.'[37] Thus, on this issue there seems to be widespread agreement and all movements also concur on the responsibility that the King has in this. It follows that there is quite a considerable pressure on the regime to act on this specific issue, but the outcome is never serious political reforms, but simply the dismissal of officials that are named and shamed, while the practice as a whole, which is the inevitable result of an authoritarian system, never disappears.

Such an informal alliance against corruption is however never taken to a higher level of formality to demand much deeper changes. Each side, once obtained a significant result on a single issue, retreats to the safety of their respective ideological position and continues on a pattern of competition.

In fact, in both countries the competitive pattern is much stronger and is the dominant trait of their interactions. In Algeria, the competitive pattern is much more

important than the co-operative one. This is partly due to the legacy of the civil war that pitted Islamist insurgents against a supposedly secular regime, but to hold the civil war solely responsible for the prevalence of the competitive behaviour would be misleading. The battle lines among civil society groups had been in place even before the civil war because secular and religious groups had very different ideas about the future of the country from an institutional and developmental point of view. In Algeria the question of the role and place of women in society has for instance undermined any possible cooperation given the ultimately conflicting positions that exist. When it comes to proposals about the future and what groups imagine the new society to look like, the differences emerge quite strongly. On the one hand, most secular and liberal groups imagine a society that would work along similar lines to the ones that characterise Western liberal democracies with a very strong preference for the social democratic European model. This is possibly due to the influence of French political thinking among the secular elements in Algeria. On the other hand, Islamist groups still believe in the creation of the Islamic state and would tend to be on the conservative side when it comes to the traditional liberal freedoms and human rights associated with liberal democracy. Goytisolo emphasised this at the time of the cancellation of elections: 'the secular minority, the Marxists and the Berbers of RCD led by Dr. Saadi also approve[d] of the coup: no freedom for the enemies of freedom.'[38] The dynamic that develops therefore is one of suspicion and mistrust rather than one based on co-operation and mutually shared minimal goals. Of particular relevance is the suspicion that liberals harbour when it comes to the participation of Islamists to institutional politics. Ali Benhadj, recently state again that 'he fights for an Islamic Algerian state, governed by the Book.'[39] Fundamental differences exist as well when it comes to international politics and to the economic policies the country should adopt.

In Jordan the competitive pattern is also dominant, even though less intense. The Secretary General of Islamic Action Front Zaki Bani Ershaid would be formally in favour of building alliances with secular groups, but he had this to say about them: 'secular groups are fragmented forces, unstable, because they move from power to opposition without sticking to clear principles. In other words they are governed by short-term vision in order to achieve power and financial gains.'[40] It follows that the degree of cooperation can only be weak, as there is very little respect for what the

secular groups attempt to achieve. When it comes to secular figures, they not only have a very different idea of what democratic Jordan should look like, but also harbour the same suspicions as their Algerian counterparts. As one prominent figure emphasised, 'as liberals we do not mind to cooperate with Islamists so as to consolidate the democratic transition in Jordan. However, such cooperation requires building a trust with Islamists. We are worried about the Islamists' hidden agenda, the Islamists might use democracy to gain power and then have the issue of one man, one vote, one time.'[41] Thus, the same pattern identified in Algeria characterises relations in Jordan as well and the interactions are limited and largely based on conflict. What compounds the problem in Jordan is also the 'mutual recriminations syndrome' that affects secular and religious groups. Each side is very ready in fact to criticise the other for making secret deals with the regime to grant it legitimacy in order to obtain both political and practical favours. While IAF accuses some liberal personalities and certain groups like the Arab Centre of Human Rights of promoting a pro-Western agenda as shared by the King, they are accused in turn of 'giving legitimacy to the ruling family in the most difficult times and making alliances with the king in return for personal and party gains. Most liberals and democrats in Jordan have their doubts regarding future alliance and cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood.'[42]

Part of the problem seems to be the absence of a balance of power among the groups and the 'type' of individuals they attract. The secular liberal groups constitute a minority within civil society and, by their own admission, have a very difficult time in publicising their message and their activities. In general, they also suffer from financial problems that limit their activism and much of the funds that pour in come from Western governments or organisations, which leaves them vulnerable to the accusation of conspiring with the West at a time when European and US policies in the region are not particularly popular. In addition, secular groups attract a very much professional, middle-class and well-educated membership with limited links to the much larger working classes and the disenfranchised. In contrast, the Islamist groups, by their own admission as well, are very popular and constitute the majority stakeholder in civil society. They can count of a larger membership, have more resources available to invest in their civic engagement and are able to use Islam, an easy reference, for their charitable and political work. Given that a balance of power does not exist, a rather peculiar game develops whereby the ruling elites, counting on

the fear of the secular associations and individuals, is able to use them for propping itself up, replicating what they did in the past with reversed roles. The Jordanian example clearly indicates this because the liberals are correct when they point out that the Islamist factions advanced their agenda by striking deals with the royal family. This is however no longer so much the case, particularly because of increased Islamist radicalism in the country and the royal family seems to count much more strongly on the support of secular and liberal groups for its own survival. This occurs even though, at least nominally, all groups, both religious and secular, defend the cause of democracy, accountability, and human rights. A further paradox is that the so-called democratic elements within Arab societies are the strongest advocates of dictatorship for fear that what they perceive to be totalitarian movements would seize power through the ballot box. In all of this, the Islamists sound most reasonable and coherent when they argue that the democratic will of the people should adjudicate on whom has the right to rule.

Conclusion

The absence of meaningful and successful processes of democratisation in the Arab world is one of the most important political puzzles that scholars have to deal with today because the political and social developments of the region are so central to international stability and economic progress. In order to try to account for such an absence, there is the need for useful theoretical tools and assumptions. It is no surprise that the transition paradigm has been used to interpret and understand the trends occurring in the region because such paradigm seemed to be a successful model for a number of transitions of the third wave. The evidence from the case studies though shows that such model is inadequate, proving that the scepticism of Carothers and Diamond is well founded. Not only the transition paradigm fails in its teleological aspect, some of its apparently more solid assumptions about the behaviour of actors operating under authoritarian constraints are very much open to contention. Contrary to expectations, opposition groups within Arab civil society do not exhibit the traits and the behaviour that it was exhibited in other contexts.

This finding has two very important implications. The first one confirms what Przeworski, building on Weber, argued two decades ago when analysing the survival of authoritarian regimes: legitimacy is not necessary for authoritarian regimes to survive. In fact, ‘what matters for the stability of any regime is not the legitimacy of

this particular system of domination but the presence or absence of preferable alternatives.'[43] In the Arab world, what is missing today is precisely a workable alternative that could attract and spur citizens into action against a regime that might not enjoy legitimacy, but that does not need it to rule. The lack of coalition building among opposition actors with radically different political projects exacerbates this problem and permits the survival of weak regimes in the face of a strong, but divided civil society. In an environment where effective political parties do not exist, civil society takes on the role of main opposition and seems, at first glance, united in the demands they make on authoritarian leaders because they are all couched in the language of democracy, accountability, modernisation and human rights. However, effective coalition building between secular and religious groups does not occur, as mutual recriminations and suspicions dominate their interactions. The regime is thus greatly facilitated in its task of dividing and conquering. The second implication is that the Arab world might indeed be exceptional when it comes to governance, but 'what makes it exceptional is less culture, per se, than the unique institutional-social structural configurations by which it has combined mass incorporating populism with rent-lubricated patrimonialism.'[44] Agency might matter, but it can only matter when in a dynamic relationship with structural factors.

There are also foreign policy implications from these findings, which should lead policy-makers, if serious about democratisation in the region, to work in favour of building bridges between religious and secular groups to form a coalition capable of removing the current authoritarian leaders without having the country descending into anarchy. Current policy choices do not seem to go in that direction and advice to policy-makers either.[45]

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